

A Stranger Solstice by jackwabbit

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Summary: A series of short, unrelated fics. There will be twenty-four of them this month, but I can't promise daily posting. Multiple characters, pairings, ratings, and fandoms likely. See headers on each fic/chapter for more details. Some will be holiday themed. I figure it's been ten years since the first one, so why not? Welcome to yet another Advent Challenge from wabbit!

1. Hand-Me-Downs

Hand-Me-Downs

Fandom: Stranger Things

Rated: PG

Category: Gen. Vignette. Family, Friendship. Entire Party.

Time Frame: Shortly after Season Two.

Spoilers: Stranger Things, Season Two.

Summary: Eleven gets a lot of hand-me-downs. But not usually from Dustin.

Word Count: 2113

The basement was exactly as she remembered it.

Even her fort and bed were there.

But there was one thing missing: Dustin.

The others were all there, gathered around a small table in the center of the space. Because apparently tonight was game night. And since both Max and El were new and couldn't just join in to the boy's usual D&D adventure, they were going to start a new one.

Mike had helped Eleven create a character, and Lucas had made one for Max.

But they couldn't start until Dustin got there, so for now, they were playing Sorry and talking about everything and nothing. Finally, Lucas had had enough.

"Man, where is he, anyway?" he asked.

Mike muttered an answer around a mouthful of chips. "Hockey."

Lucas sighed and Will rolled his eyes.

"Oh, yeah. I guess it is that time of year," said Lucas.

"Yeah, the time of year when Dustin is late for everything,"

complained Will.

"Yep," agreed Mike.

The boys were so busy complaining that they didn't notice Eleven's confused look nor Max's interested one until El interrupted them.

"What's hockey?" she asked.

Max answered for the boys, who seemed to have forgotten the girls were even there.

"It's a game," she said. "Like baseball, but different. And on ice."

Eleven nodded in understanding. She knew about baseball, courtesy of Hopper's obsession with it and the radio in the cabin. But she still had questions.

"On ice?"

"Yeah," chimed in Mike. "With skates."

"Skates?"

The others shared a look at Eleven's expression of utter incomprehension. With her age and abilities, it was easy to forget that she had the life experience Mike's little sister, and a very limited vocabulary too. Max took pity on her first.

"They're these things you wear on your feet, to go fast," she explained.

"Yeah," agreed Will. "You glide around on the ice with them."

Just then, Dustin burst through the door and came charging down the stairs.

"Did I miss it?" he yelled. "Did you start yet?"

"Dude!" answered Lucas. "You know we wouldn't start without you."

"Sweet," said Dustin. "Let's do this!"

"Hold on," said Mike. "We're explaining hockey to El."

Dustin's eyes lit up. "Oh, what part? Offense? Defense? Penalties? Power plays?"

The entire party, save Eleven, gave him a look.

"We're up to what ice skates are," said Max in a deadpan voice.

Dustin blinked. "Oh."

"Yeah," said Lucas. "Oh."

"So, anyway," said Mike. "You put on the skates and you try to get the puck in the net."

Eleven just stared at him and blinked a few times until Mike grew restless.

"Uh... Dustin? A little help here?" he said.

Dustin sighed. "Okay, so the puck. It's this little black thing. And you have this stick. And you hit the puck with it and try to get it in the other team's goal."

Eleven shifted her stare to Dustin, but still didn't say anything, and it was obvious she was still confused.

"You know what?" said Dustin. "It'd be easier to show you."

Then he turned to Mike. "Is Nancy home?"

Mike shook his head, as confused as Eleven at the sudden topic change.

"Good," said Dustin. "Come on."

With that, he grabbed El's hand and dragged her up the stairs. The rest of the party looked at each other for a minute, then shrugged and followed.

They kept going until they got to Nancy's room, where Dustin barreled in without knocking.

"Dustin!" yelled Mike, Lucas, Will, and Max at the same time.

"What?" asked Dustin. "You said she wasn't home."

"You still can't just barge into her room," said Mike.

"Well, your dad's watching the other TV," explained Dustin. "What else was I supposed to do?"

As he spoke, he turned on Nancy's little TV and played with the knobs and the antenna for a minute until he got a mostly clear picture of the Blackhawks game on the screen.

"There," he announced. "Hockey."

The other boys groaned, wanting to head back to the basement and do anything else, but Max looked interested, and Eleven was grinning from ear to ear.

"Like the pond!" she squealed, seeming half her age all of a sudden.

The group didn't get it, and it showed on their faces.

"Like the pond," she repeated. "In the woods."

Dustin snapped his fingers. "Yeah, yeah!" he exclaimed. "Old Man Murphy's pond! I used to skate there all the time."

"Me too!" said Eleven.

"What?" asked Mike, as the others goggled at her.

"No skates," she said, "but still fun. Before the cabin."

"When you lived in the woods," said Max, understanding before the boys caught on.

Eleven nodded, then grinned mischievously. "And more after, but don't tell."

Dustin laughed out loud. "Oh my God! You used to sneak out of the Chief's cabin and go ice skating on Old Man Murphy's pond?! Holy shit! That's classic!"

"It was fun," said El with a shrug, as if that explained everything.

Mike gasped. "Someone could've seen you! You could've fallen in! Or... or anything!"

"Oh, lay off, man," said Lucas. "You worry too much."

"Yeah," added Max. "She's here, isn't she? So calm down."

Even Will had to agree. "Yeah, come on, man. How many times have we done stuff that was dangerous?"

Mike snorted and fell back onto his sister's bed. "You mean besides The Upside Down?"

They all laughed nervously. Because Mike had a point. There wasn't much any of them could do now to top that.

"Exactly," said Dustin, sitting next to him on the bed. "She beat the Demogorgon. And a whole mess of Demodogs. I think she can handle Murphy's pond."

Mike conceded. "Yeah. Ok. Alright. Whatever."

Eleven giggled and joined the pair on the bed. She was followed by Max, Lucas, and Will. As the TV announcers droned on in the background, they chatted for a few minutes about school and how mad Nancy would be if she knew they were hanging out in her room.

Suddenly, Max changed the subject.

"Do they let girls play?"

The group just stared at her until she elaborated.

"Hockey," she said, nodding toward the TV and looking at Dustin. "Your team. Do they let girls play?"

"Oh," mumbled Dustin. "Yeah, actually. They didn't used to, but they do now. We have two girls on our team. They're pretty good, too."

"Do you think they'd let me play?"

Mike, Will, and Lucas looked at her like she was crazy, but Dustin grinned widely, nodding his head up and down. He hadn't forgotten her actions at the Byers' house the night El closed the gate. And if her treatment of her brother was any indication, she'd do just fine.

"Oh, yeah," he said.

Max beamed, and the other boys looked positively scared at the notion of Mad Max with a hockey stick.

But Eleven just looked pensive. Mike, as per usual, noticed.

"What is it?" he asked, laying one hand on her arm.

"I can't," she murmured.

"Can't what?" asked Lucas.

Eleven nodded toward the television like Max had. "Play."

Five heads immediately started shaking from side to side, and five voices talked over each other.

"No way."

"The Chief would flip."

"It's not safe. For anyone."

"You're not even really supposed to be here."

"Nope."

Eleven nodded. "I know. But I could... skate?"

Now the head shakes turned to nods, and the voices competed again.

"Yeah."

"Why not? Hopper wouldn't even have to know."

"Of course."

"Sure."

"Absolutely."

Eleven grinned.

They never made it back to the basement that night. Instead, they talked the evening away on Nancy's bed and kind of sort of watched the hockey game, with Dustin explaining things the whole time.

That is, until Nancy came home and abruptly opened the door to find them all there.

"What are you doing in my room?" she demanded.

"Uh... nothing," said Mike, already pushing past her at a run with the others hot on his heels.

Nancy sighed. "Stay out of my room, you little brats!"

They all giggled and kept going. They charged down the two flights of stairs to the basement, sounding like a thundering herd of wild animals.

"Hey!" yelled Mr. Wheeler from his armchair, "no running in the house!"

"Sorry, dad!" returned Mike as they passed.

But no one slowed down, and Mr. Wheeler just rolled his eyes at them and turned the page of his paper.

Ten minutes later, the doorbell rang, and Will departed with Joyce.

Hopper arrived a bit after that, and El left with him.

Dustin, Lucas, and Max rode their bikes home ten minutes later, and game night, such as it was, came to an end. Mike put away all the D&D stuff on his own, then headed to bed.

Christmas was three weeks later, and the crew made out like bandits.

Max got exactly what she'd asked for: a pair of hockey skates. It

would be a year before she got the rest of her gear and took the ice with a team, but it was a start.

Mike got a Commodore 64, making his house the place to be for the next two years.

Will got an easel and a real set of pencils.

Lucas received a newer, better set of walkie-talkies.

Dustin got the full-fledged chemistry set he'd been pining after for years.

And Eleven got a makeup kit to go along with all the practical clothes she'd received.

But she also got something else. When all was said and done; when the wrapping paper was strewn about the cabin and everyone was gone and Hopper was dead asleep on the couch after hosting his first Christmas with six adolescents, she slipped into her room and noticed something she hadn't before.

There was a package peeking out from under the bed.

She pulled it out and saw a card on top. Opening it carefully, she read Dustin's writing.

I know we weren't going to exchange gifts, but these don't fit me anymore, and I thought maybe you could use them.

She opened the box to reveal a beat-up pair of ice skates.

Her face lit up brighter than the Christmas tree in the living room as she admired the gift. Then she shoved the box back under the bed and calmly changed into her pajamas for the night.

Later, when Hopper was at work, she tried them on. When she did, she found another note from Dustin inside the right skate.

Hope they fit!

They didn't. But with a pair of Hopper's thick hunting socks, they got

the job done.

She never told Hopper about the skates.

Nor did she tell him about the countless afternoons spent on Murphy's pond, both by herself and in the company of her friends.

But she did start watching Dustin's hockey games when she could, and when she asked for new skates the year she turned fifteen, absolutely no one was surprised.

A/N: They say to write what you know. Here's what I know about my childhood in a small town in Northern Ohio. Old Man Murphy was a real guy. And he did have a pond on his property. We weren't supposed to go there, so of course we played pick-up hockey on that pond whenever we could. Most of us didn't have ice skates or even hockey sticks. That didn't matter. Oh, and my dad listened to baseball all day on the radio while we hung out around the garage and told stories and such. My Hopper does the same thing while he works on the cabin.

Also, my personal head canon is that Dustin plays both hockey and baseball. I base this on the fact that, as far as we know, he's an only child and he has both hockey and baseball gear in his house that fit him. Also, he slap shots Dart into that storm cellar pretty well. He's comfortable in the gear. So he's a geek. Yep. So was I. I was on the chess team and in all honors classes and desperately wanted a chemistry set. I also batted cleanup for my softball team and was an average soccer player. I ran track, too. It took me many years to get to play hockey, but finally I managed it. Being an AV club member doesn't necessarily mean you don't play sports. I think Dustin fits into both worlds, like I did. Also, there's pariahs on sports teams, too. Just saying. As for the other boys, I don't see that so much, but a pick-up game with their squad? That's a totally different thing, and something that I see happening sometimes. Eleven's trickier. El can't play sports. Ever. It's not safe, for so many reasons. But skating? I can see that as relaxing for her. And then there's Max. If that girl isn't a hockey player, I don't know who is.

2. Warning Shot

Warning Shot

Fandom: Stranger Things

Rated: PG-13 (language)

Category: Gen. Vignette. Family, Friendship. Entire Party.

Time Frame: Shortly after Season Two.

Spoilers: Stranger Things, Season Two.

Summary: Usually, it's three strikes and you're out. But things are a bit different in Hawkins.

Word Count: 910.

Hopper hadn't even met the kid.

But he didn't need an introduction to know that the young man standing in the doorway of the Byers' residence was the infamous Billy Hargrove, older stepbrother of Max, the newest member of his crew of juvenile monster hunters.

And from the looks of it, thought Hopper from his place at the kitchen table, he's a total dick.

Still, the kid wasn't currently doing anything wrong, so Hopper let the slime factor go and waited to see how things would play out.

"Max!" yelled Billy. "Let's go!"

From deeper within the house, Hopper heard Max answer.

"Hold on! I'm coming!"

Billy sighed. "Now!"

"Yeah, yeah," said Max, emerging from Will's room with a small entourage behind her.

Hopper couldn't help but smirk as he saw Will, El, and Mike trailing Max like ducklings. With Dustin down with the flu and Lucas out of town, the other kids were even more inseparable than usual. They

seemed younger than they were most of the time, and Hopper honestly thought they were adorable - when they were quiet.

But his smile didn't last long.

As Max reached the door, Billy pushed her out onto the porch ahead of him.

"Come on, dipshit," he muttered as Max stumbled. "I don't have all night."

Hopper barely registered the look of pure rage on Eleven's face before he moved.

"El!" he bellowed, causing her head to whip around to him as Billy landed face first on the porch.

Then he was out the door and helping Billy up the only way he could, given the situation.

He grabbed a fistful of jacket and bodily dragged the kid to his car.

When he got there, he pushed Billy up against the door and got right in his face.

"Let's get one thing straight," he said. "You will never touch that girl again. Are we clear?"

Billy had the nerve to snort. "Or what?" he sneered.

Now it was Hopper's turn to snort - only his turned into a low, dark chuckle as he heard small footsteps behind him.

It was more effective than words. Billy's eyes grew wide in the dim light from the porch and he eyed Hopper warily.

"Never again," growled Hopper, meeting Billy's eyes with a glare. "You got it?"

Billy nodded, audibly swallowing as he did so.

"Good," said Hopper, with a curt nod. "Now go home."

"But..." started Billy.

"Oh, right," said Hopper. "Hey! Mad Max!"

Max came up beside him slowly. "Yeah, Chief?"

Hopper nodded toward the car. "You go on home with your brother now. And keep in touch, okay?"

He gave Billy a meaningful look as he spoke.

Max nodded and got into the passenger side of the car.

Once she was inside, Billy started to open his door, but his motion was stopped by a big hand on the doorframe.

"I mean it, punk. I hear one complaint, and you'll wish I hadn't."

"She's just a kid," muttered Billy.

And again: that low, dark chuckle from Hopper.

It had the same effect as before.

"Okay, okay. Whatever," said Billy.

Hopper let go of the door and stepped back.

A moment later, Billy and Max were on their way home. Hopper watched them go, then turned to go back into the house.

As he did, he saw that he had an audience. Mike and Will were beaming at him from the doorway. Joyce was watching through the window, looking like she wasn't sure if she should laugh or cry.

And then there was Eleven. She was standing just behind him in the driveway, and she was actually pouting. Her arms were crossed over her chest, her lower lip was stuck out, and she was glaring at him.

He chuckled again, but this time, there was no darkness in it.

"Sorry, kid," he muttered, giving her a light punch on the shoulder as he reached her. "Not this time."

Eleven sighed.

"I wasn't going to hurt him."

Hopper just looked at her, eyebrows raised.

"Much," added El.

Hopper sighed and pulled her into a one-armed hug as they started back toward the house.

"We talked about this."

Eleven mirrored his sigh.

"I know," she said.

"And?" prompted Hopper.

El heaved a bigger sigh. "No using powers unless someone's life is in danger."

"There you go," said Hopper.

El stopped walking, causing him to stop and look at her.

"But he deserved it!"

Hopper considered this, then nodded.

"He did."

"So why'd you stop me?"

"You know it's not safe," Hopper said seriously. Then, with a grin, he added, "Besides, can't let you have all the fun."

Eleven looked annoyed until Hopper spoke again.

"How about we consider it a warning shot?"

El's brow furrowed. "Warning shot?"

"It's a... A shot that misses on purpose."

Eleven's look of confusion grew. "Why?"

"It gives people a chance to fix things before the real shot."

El thought this over for a minute before asking for clarification.

"A strike?"

Hopper smiled, remembering when he'd taught her about baseball - and metaphors.

"Yeah," he said. "A strike."

El thought some more, then met Hopper's eye. There was a slight gleam in hers.

"Does he get three?"

Hopper's smile turned mischievous.

"You know what? I think two is plenty in this case."

"So if he does it again..."

Hopper shrugged. "Have at him - gently."

Eleven's grin was positively wicked, and Hopper almost felt sorry for the Hargrove kid.

Almost.

3. Personal Reasons

Personal Reasons

Fandom: Stranger Things

Rated: G

Category: Gen. Vignette. Family. Dustin.

Time Frame: Pre-Series.

Spoilers: None/General Series Knowledge Only.

Summary: In my world, Dustin plays hockey. But why hockey, specifically?

Word Count: 374

Dustin Henderson burst through the door of his house like so many nine-year-olds did: with a slammed door and just one word on his lips.

"Mom!" he yelled, as he kicked off his shoes.

Said mother poked her head out of the kitchen.

"Yes?"

"Look!"

Dustin brandished a piece of paper at her as he barreled into the room.

She took the paper and raised her eyebrows at her son.

"And just what am I looking at, exactly?"

Dustin beamed. "A flyer!"

"I can see that," said Claudia with a sigh.

"For hockey tryouts! Well, sign ups, actually, because you don't have to try out, because they'll let anyone play. See! It says so right there!"

Dustin jabbed a finger at the paper as his mother looked at him

skeptically.

"You want to play hockey?"

Dustin nodded approximately eight times. "Can I?"

Claudia hesitated. "Well... I don't know, Dusty. I'll have to talk to your father, but... where is this coming from?"

"Well," said Dustin. "You and Dad are always saying I should get out more, and I thought it'd be fun, and..."

Dustin trailed off, becoming a bit unsure, and his mom picked up the conversation.

"OK. But why hockey? There are so many things to do."

Dustin's insecurity vanished and he smiled from ear to ear. Actually, he more than smiled. He showed all his teeth, or lack thereof, in a bizarre version of a smiling grimace. Then he pushed himself up onto his tiptoes and right into his mother's face. His behavior and expression was made all the more bizarre by the fact that he currently had no top front teeth and only stubs for bottom front teeth and the rest were crooked or elongated beyond the norm.

It took her a few seconds, but all of a sudden, Claudia got it.

She started to chuckle slowly, and Dustin's face relaxed into a more normal grin. He leaned back down to his normal height and looked expectantly at his mom.

"So, can I?" he asked.

Claudia nodded. "Yeah, sweetie. You can play hockey."

And so he did.

And just like in school, he was called "Toothless" on the ice, but for the first time ever, that wasn't much of an insult.

4. Hideaway

Hideaway

Fandom: Stranger Things

Rated: G

Category: Gen. Vignette. Family. Hopper and Eleven.

Time Frame: Some time after season two, before the upcoming season three.

Spoilers: Stranger Things, Seasons One and Two.

Summary: Hopper makes a house into a home for Eleven, but sometimes they still need a hideaway.

Word Count: 913

Note: when I was a child, I camped at a place called Hideaway. I have a significant scar to prove it. This one's for you, Dad, for teaching me how to fish, for letting me get the kitten, and for being there when I came to.

The first time El visited the trailer, it was just a quick stop.

Hopper said he had to pick something up. He told her to wait in the truck.

She didn't.

As he came out from the back, shoving some papers into a bag, he jumped when he saw her standing in the doorway.

Then he took a deep breath and put on his best grin.

"Well," he drawled. "What'd'ya think?"

Eleven scanned the room, then gave Hopper a dubious look.

Hopper noticed and ran a hand over the back of his neck.

"Uh, yeah..." he muttered. "Haven't been around much."

Eleven tentatively sniffed the air.

Hopper sighed.

"Yeah, I know. Let's go."

With that, he bodily turned her around and ushered her out the door.

The second time was just under a year later, and the circumstances were vastly different.

Now, as Hopper led El through the door, her eyes were widened with wonder, rather than narrowed in disgust.

He'd hung actual curtains. He'd gotten rid of all the trashed furniture and replaced it with new stuff. There were clean sheets on the beds and fresh towels in the kitchen and bathroom. There wasn't a beer can or dirty dish in sight.

Everything matched, too.

He'd even hung pictures on the wall, and the fridge was covered with drawings held in place by colorful magnets.

Eleven gravitated there first. She ran a hand over the papers and smiled, then looked at Hopper with gleaming eyes.

"Will?"

Hopper nodded. "The others too. A housewarming gift."

"Housewarming?"

Hopper chuckled, still amazed by how far El had come and how far she had left to go.

"It's a... A present to make a new place feel like home."

"Home," mumbled Eleven, tracing that same word on one of the drawings.

Hopper let her linger for a moment, then clapped his hands once.

"Wanna see the rest of the place?"

El nodded and stepped away from the fridge. Hopper then gave her the nickel tour, showing her the bedrooms, the bathrooms, and the small deck outside.

When he was done, they sat down on the living room couch together.

"Not bad, huh, kid?"

Eleven gave an approving nod, and Hopper let out a relieved sigh.

"Better than the cabin?"

El looked pensive for a moment, then shook her head.

Hopper looked disappointed. "No?"

"No," said Eleven. "Not better. Just different."

"Guess that's true," conceded Hopper.

They were quiet for a long moment after that. Eleven's eyes moved rapidly back and forth, focusing around the room, and Hopper got nervous. He could tell she was getting antsy.

"Hey," he whispered, "you okay?"

Eleven nodded hesitantly.

"We don't have to," said Hopper. "We can stay in the cabin. I just thought..."

He trailed off, not sure of himself. Frankly, he liked the cabin. But the trailer was closer to town. There were two bathrooms, and he'd be able to sleep in an actual bedroom, with at least a semblance of privacy.

The TV reception was better too.

But if El wasn't ready... If she wanted to stick with what she knew, he'd scrap the whole idea.

He was thinking of doing just that when her small voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Benny," she said clearly.

Hopper blinked a few times and scratched his beard absently, trying to make sense of that. When he failed to do so, he shook his head.

"What?"

"Benny," repeated Eleven, standing and crossing to a shelf on the wall.

The shelf held a row of framed pictures. There was one of the kids - Will, Mike, Lucas, Dustin, Max, and El - from the Snow Ball last year. A black and white one showed four soldiers. Another was of a smiling blonde girl in front of a huge statue. And lastly, there was a much younger Hopper, in football gear and with his arm thrown around a teammate.

Both young men were grinning ear to ear. Eleven ran one finger over the faces in the picture, then turned toward Hopper with tears in her eyes.

"Benny," she said yet again. Her lower lip trembled ever so slightly, and Hopper suddenly understood.

He closed his eyes and exhaled heavily.

"You saw."

It wasn't a question.

Eleven nodded as her face scrunched up. Her pained expression seemed frozen for a moment.

And then she was sobbing and Hopper held her to his chest and rocked her gently back and forth right there on the floor.

He whispered platitudes into her hair as he ran one hand up and down her back.

They sat like that until they both could breathe normally again.

Then Hopper stood suddenly and held out a hand to her. She took it

and followed him out the door without another word passing between the two.

They didn't stay in the trailer that night. Or the next. Or for the following twenty-six nights.

But eventually, they did. For a night. And then for a few more a week later.

And when it was all said and done, they lived there. There were real dinners and friends and cars in the drive and some pictures that changed and some that never did.

But sometimes, it was just too much. He'd meet her eyes across the room, and she'd give him a barely noticeable nod.

If they were alone, they'd say nothing.

If they weren't, his gruff voice would clear everyone out in a heartbeat.

And on those nights, the cabin was still home.

5. Weekly Tradition

Weekly Tradition

Fandom: Stranger Things

Rated: G

Category: Gen. Vignette. Family. Hopper and Eleven.

Time Frame: Probably sometime after season two, before the upcoming season three.

Spoilers: Stranger Things, Season Two.

Summary: Every time I turn around, I see the girl who turns my world around.

Word Count: 461

Hopper didn't watch much television.

Between work, Eleven, chores, and the basic necessities of life, he just didn't have the time.

And when he did manage to pry a few minutes free, he usually read a book.

Well, these days anyway. He read to El sometimes. But she needed that less and less, so he mostly read on his own to set an example. He figured the kid watched TV all day, so it was the least he could do to try to encourage some other forms of entertainment.

So most nights in the cabin were quiet save for the rustling of pages.

But not Sunday nights.

On Sundays, they watched TV.

Mostly, that was because Hopper made a rule that Sundays were for football and the viewing just continued naturally into the evening. But regardless of the reason, it became a thing.

Sunday nights were for television.

They usually watched *Ripley's Believe It Or Not*. It was a running joke

that they should be on the show rather than watching it, so it was a staple.

That is, until one week when Ripley's was a rerun and the only other channel they could get was airing a show about a rich kid with an overgrown train set that Hopper only wished he'd had as a boy.

They'd watched the boy's antics for half an hour when it happened.

Or rather, El had. Hopper had dozed off by the time *Silver Spoons* ended and the next show came on.

This one starred a young girl. A young girl with dark hair and a non-traditional fashion sense.

Hopper didn't wake up to see El's reaction to *Punky Brewster*. In fact, he didn't wake up until an hour later, when he shooed her to bed and quickly followed suit.

But the next week, when he started to tune in to Ripley's, Eleven shook her head.

"No," she said simply.

Hopper was confused. "No?"

Eleven shook her head. "I want to watch Punky."

"What?" asked Hopper, more than a bit confused. "What's Punky?"

"Punky Brewster."

"Again, what?"

"It's a show," explained El. "With this girl, and her dog, and her dad, and her friends."

Hopper sighed, but didn't even try to argue. He knew when he was beaten.

"Ok," he said, shaking his head slightly. "What channel?"

"Thirteen."

Hopper was adjusting the dials when Eleven's voice stilled him.

"But it's not on until 7:30. We can watch the first half of Ripley's if you want."

So it was settled. They watched Ripley's to the halfway point, then flipped over to *Punky Brewster*. This became their new pattern.

And despite his misgivings, somewhere along the way, Hopper started to enjoy it.

He just hoped El never noticed that the theme song always made him cry.

A/N: Earlier this week, I woke up with the Punky Brewster theme song in my head (yes, I still know it, and I'm officially old). Today over lunch, it popped in there again. I blame *Stranger Things* for this, since Ray was watching Punky when Kali and El go after him. And today, I didn't fight it. I went down the YouTube rabbit hole and watched it. When I did, the lyrics struck me as something that would resonate with Hopper. This is the result of that thought.

6. Mixed Blessing

Mixed Blessing

Fandom: Stranger Things

Rated: G

Category: Gen, humor. Drabble.

Time Frame: Late 1985/Early 1986, so in theory, between seasons three and four/future fic.

Spoilers: None.

Summary: You take the good with the bad, I suppose.

Word Count: 100 (drabble, yo)

Note: I lived in Illinois in 1985-1986. I feel ya, Jim. I do.

Hopper had always been a Bears fan.

His dad had been a Bears fan, and despite the rocky relationship they'd had for most of his life, he still fondly remembered listening to and later watching the Bears on Sundays.

So when Indianapolis got a team, he really didn't care. The fact that they were awful didn't do much to change that. Jim Hopper was a Bears guy.

So he was thrilled that they were going to the Super Bowl for the first time.

But if he had to hear the Super Bowl Shuffle even once more, lives would be lost.

7. Elephant in the Room

Elephant in the Room

Fandom: Stranger Things

Rated: PG

Category: Family, humor, Jopper implied. Jonathan focus.

Time Frame: Any time/after season two.

Spoilers: None.

Summary: Jonathan Byers has never heard that you're not supposed to run from an elephant – and even if he had, he wouldn't care. Not this time. Even with a steep price, retreat really is his only option.

Word Count: 409

Jonathan was late.

Very late.

But as per usual, the lights were still on in the house as he turned into the drive.

He sighed, knowing how the rest of his night would go. Because no matter how late it got, his mom never turned in until he was home. So even though he'd try his best to sneak in, she'd wake from dozing on the couch to scold him for his tardiness, and he'd be grounded for a week.

Or maybe not, thought Jonathan, as he pulled further into the drive. *Maybe not this time.*

Because there was a second vehicle there.

Hopper's Blazer was parked next to the Pinto, and Jonathan's brow furrowed.

He wasn't sure whether to be worried or amused. Hopper had been spending more and more time at the Byers' house lately, and most of the time, Jonathan thought it was hilarious how Hopper and Joyce were the only two people who seemed oblivious to this fact.

So he wondered if they'd finally decided to address the elephant in the room – the glances, the touches, the schoolgirl giggling and rumbling laughs he never heard from either of them without the other being present.

In all honesty, he rather hoped they had.

But tonight, with it being so late, he couldn't help but worry. Had something else happened? Was it Will? He was staying the night at Mike's. He should've been fine. But anything was possible. Or was it El? Or something new entirely? Jonathan's brain supplied so many options that couldn't focus on just one.

So this time, as he slipped into the house, he was filled with even more trepidation than usual. He carefully eased the door closed and glanced around.

That's when he saw it.

It wasn't an elephant.

It was just a stray sock, laying on the hallway floor.

In the Byers household, this wasn't unusual.

Except it wasn't his.

And it was too big to be Will's and it was definitely not something his mom would wear.

Jonathan's eyes grew into saucers and he froze for a moment. His brain took a while to process what that one lone sock meant as he simultaneously took in the empty couch.

Then he reversed course and slipped back out the door as quietly as he'd come in.

He'd spend the night somewhere else. Anywhere else.

And if that meant he was grounded for a month instead of a week, so be it.

8. Be Prepared

Be Prepared

Fandom: Stranger Things

Rated: G

Category: Gen. Family. Hopper and Eleven.

Time Frame: Shortly after season two.

Spoilers: General series knowledge.

Summary: Hopper has skills that aren't apparent. Good thing, too.

Word Count: 1351

Jane mystified Hopper.

And not just with the fact that there was no "if" in "if looks could kill" with her.

Sure, that blew him away and he tried not to think about it too much, but with all he'd seen in the past two years, that was his new normal. Interdimensional monsters made telekinesis not such a big deal.

But it was the little things that still astounded him on a nearly daily basis.

Today, for example, he woke before dawn to the sound of her crying.

He was up in a flash and was at her side a moment later, flicking the lights on as he went.

He found her on the floor next to her bed, sobbing hard and cradling something whitish-tan and fuzzy in her arms.

When he finally got her to calm down, she didn't tell him what was wrong. Instead, she just held out the battered teddy bear he'd given her a year ago and looked at him with sad, pleading eyes.

The bear's left arm had been torn off.

Hopper took the bear and gave Jane a puzzled look. After a long

moment, she finally spoke.

"Bad dream."

Hopper took a big breath, in and out, then nodded.

"It happens," he said, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"I hurt her," muttered Jane.

And there it was. This girl had killed at least a dozen men. She'd fought off a full-fledged monster and who knows how many mini monsters. She'd traveled to Chicago and back completely on her own. She'd closed an interdimensional portal with her mind. She was thirteen years old. She was hardly a child. And yet here she was, devastated over the wounding of a teddy bear. It was so incongruous it made Jim's head spin.

Even Sara, forever five in his mind, wouldn't have been this upset over something like that.

Then again, Sara had known something Jane didn't.

Hopper smiled. It was time to let Jane in on that little secret.

"Stay here," he said, handing the bear back to Jane. "I'll be right back."

Jane sucked in a quick breath through her nose and looked at little scared as Hopper stood up, again seeming so much younger than she was.

"Trust me, it'll be OK," said Hopper, patting Jane's shoulder. "Just give me a minute."

Jane settled and nodded and Hopper left the room.

He went out to the kitchen, reached on top the refrigerator and retrieved a small box, then returned to the bedroom. Jane was right where he'd left her, still cradling the bear.

He sat down in front of her and held out his hands.

"May I?" he asked, nodding toward the bear.

Jane nodded and gently passed him both pieces of the bear.

"Now," said Hopper. "Let's see what we can do here."

As he talked, he opened the box and pulled out a needle and several spools of thread. He held the thread out to Jane and then held them up, one by one, to the bear.

"What color, do you think?"

Jane looked puzzled.

"Don't have much to choose from, but I think we can find something that will do. How about this one?"

He held up a khaki-colored thread, and Jane looked even more confused.

Hopper sighed. He forgot that he had to start at the beginning with Jane. Every time.

"We're going to fix her, see," he explained. "And nobody likes to have a scar. So we have to match the thread to her fur."

Jane beamed, suddenly seeming to understand.

"Yeah, that one!" she said, pointing to the thread in his hand.

Hopper nodded appreciatively. "Good choice. Let's do this."

Then he threaded the needle and began sewing the bear's arm back onto her body with practiced stitches as Jane watched in wonder.

He was about halfway done when he looked up at Jane.

"You wanna do some?"

Jane looked apprehensive, but nodded slowly, so Hopper handed over the bear and the needle.

"OK. So just put the needle through there. Yeah. And there. Now

pull."

Jane did as she was told, and a much sloppier stitch resulted. She glared at it, then tried to hand the bear back to Hopper.

"Hey, none of that," said Hopper. "Nobody does it perfect the first time. Try again."

Jane gave him a frustrated look, but then focused on the bear again. She bit her lip and tried again with the same result.

"It's OK," said Hopper, cutting off her protest before it could start. "Do another one."

She did. And this time, it was better. It was still a long way from Hopper's neat stitching, but it was much better. Jane smiled and looked up at Hopper with pride in her eyes.

"There you go," he said. "Keep going."

And so she did. She made it five more stitches before suddenly jumping and yelping.

"And watch your fingers," said Hopper. "You want me to finish it?"

Jane sucked on her index finger in silence for a moment, then shook her head.

Hopper grinned at her newfound determination. "Alright, then, have at it."

Jane removed her finger from her mouth and kept going. After far longer than it would have taken him, Hopper saw her nearing the end of the torn area and reached for the bear again.

"OK. That's good. Now, lemme see her. I'll show you how to tie it off to finish."

Jane handed the bear over and watched closely as Hopper did just that. Then he held up the bear and made it wave at Jane with the previously amputated arm.

"See? Good as new."

Jane took the bear and hugged it to her chest. Then she climbed back in bed and yawned. Hopper looked out the window and shrugged.

"Guess it is still dark," he muttered. "You good if I go back to bed too?"

Jane nodded sleepily. Hopper snorted a small laugh, then ruffled her hair, but he made no move to leave.

Instead, he climbed into the chair next to Jane's bed and watched as she fell rapidly asleep again.

Then he carefully extricated the bear from her arms and resealed the area she'd done so that it would hold up to how rough she was on the thing. After he finished, he slipped the bear back into bed with her and gathered his supplies. They went back into the box and then back on top the fridge.

By then, the sun was peeking over the horizon. But it was Sunday, and he didn't have to work, so instead of making breakfast and heading out for the day, he went back to bed too.

He fell asleep with a smile on his face, grateful for two things.

One, that Jane's tears hadn't been from anything too serious.

And two, that he'd fallen that day in the woods when he was seven.

Because that was the day his grandfather had handed him a spool of thread and a needle and told him to patch up his pants and get on with the hike.

He hadn't wanted to. He'd tried to pull the "sewing is for girls" card. But the old man had just given him a look and said that "Davy Crockett's mommy didn't follow him around to fix his pants." Young Jim hadn't been able to think of an argument for that, so he'd fixed his torn trousers with a spool of mismatched thread and a dull needle fished from his grandfather's pack while the old man gave him pointers. He'd done an admirable job that day, all things considered, but he'd notice a much neater line of stitching placed over his the

next week.

And given that the Hopper men were nothing if not competitive, that led to a contest between him and his grandfather to see who could sew faster (his grandfather – always) and better (Jim – eventually), and Hopper had always been thankful for that.

Because while he might not be Davy Crockett, all alone on the frontier, patches didn't sew themselves on uniforms, and teddy bear surgery was always an emergency.

Always.

A/N: my nephew recently joined the Boy Scouts. He asked me to sew some patches on his uniform. He's fourteen. I told him I would. Once. But then he could come to the house and I'd teach him to do it instead. He balked at the idea. On the spot, I used the Davy Crockett line in this story on him, because it's true. Everyone should know how to sew. He couldn't come up with an argument. I figure Hopper might have been in a similar predicament once upon a time, so here we are. Plus, look at the flag patch on his coat in the first season. It's hand sewn, and one corner is a bit loose. He doesn't take that coat to someone. Just saying.

Also, the Boy Scouts have no sewing merit badge, which is absolute crap for an organization with a motto of "Be Prepared."

Oh, and this one is for my mom, who didn't force me to learn to sew as a boy (I'm self-taught in the past ten years – thanks, internet!), but who fixed Pinky for me when I was in college.

9. Like Riding a Bike

Like Riding a Bike

Fandom: Stranger Things

Rated: PG

Category: Gen. Family. Hopper and Eleven. Holiday Fic.

Time Frame: Shortly after season two.

Spoilers: General series knowledge.

Summary: Some things, once learned, are never forgotten.

Word Count: 751

When he was seven years old, Jim Hopper got a bike for Christmas.

It was red and white and the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

He couldn't ride it until spring, though (except for that time he rode it down the stairs when his parents ran to the store for a minute, but that hardly counted), so for months he just stared at it.

But finally, the snow melted and the roads cleared and he was able to ride.

And ride he did.

He'd known how before. Mostly.

But it wasn't until the spring of forty-eight that he really got it.

And he used his newfound knowledge as often as possible. He rode all over town.

And like most kids, he did so for years.

But eventually, as happens, the bike stopped gathering miles and instead collected nothing but dust.

It ended up in a barn on his grandmother's property; property he'd largely forgotten he owned.

That is, until Joyce glanced up at him one morning at Melvald's and asked what he was getting El for Christmas.

"I dunno," sighed Hopper, browsing the shelves while Joyce stuck price tags on candy canes. "Clothes, I guess. Lord knows she needs 'em."

Joyce gave him a look. "And something fun, too, I hope?"

Hopper sighed again. "What's wrong with clothes?"

"Nothing," said Joyce. "It's just...she should get something else too, Hop."

"I know. But it's not like she's a... a normal kid, Joyce. She doesn't like Star Wars or any of that stuff. Hell, she's never even seen a movie."

Joyce raised her eyebrows at him. "And whose fault is that?"

"Jesus, not you, too," he grouched.

Joyce laughed. "I'm teasing, Hop. I know you can't take her out yet."

Hopper half-glared at her, and Joyce giggled again.

"But there are other things..." she drawled.

"Like what?" asked Hopper. "If you've got suggestions, I'm all ears."

Joyce thought for a moment, tapping one finger on her lips absently.

After a moment, she grinned and met Hopper's eyes. He looked away suddenly as she did, not wanting her to notice that he'd been fixated on her gesture.

"What about a bike?" asked Joyce.

"No," answered Hopper. "Absolutely not."

"Why not?"

"She doesn't know how to ride one."

Joyce rolled her eyes. "I'm sure she can learn, Hop. "

"And I don't want her riding all over town. I have a hard enough time keeping her under control as it is."

Joyce raised her eyebrows at that.

"Well, then she's just going to keep riding double with Mike," she said nonchalantly. Then she turned back to her pricing.

Hopper didn't visibly react to Joyce's words. But he did turn on his heel and leave the store.

Behind him, Joyce chuckled.

An hour later, Hopper's blazer pulled into a pasture at the end of a disused road. He climbed out and looked up at the old barn there with an odd look on his face. He hadn't been here since his gran died, but it was still technically his.

So after a moment, he shouldered open the barn door. It took some effort, but he got it eventually.

Inside, he found just what he'd expected. Dust, musty, ancient hay, and more dust. A few rusty tools were scattered about. Otherwise, the barn looked empty.

But looks can be deceiving.

Hopper walked over to the second horse stall on the right and shined a flashlight inside it.

Once the beam lit up the stall's contents, he grinned.

Because there, wedged in between a pile of old horse blankets and a wheelbarrow, was that old red and white bike.

The next day, he went back to Melvald's. He bought sandpaper and paint and WD-40 and was grateful Joyce was off that day.

And for the next two weeks, he left for work early.

El didn't notice because she'd developed that teenage habit of sleeping in, and Flo didn't notice because he was still late almost every day.

And in the end, it paid off.

Because on Christmas morning, in a little cabin in the woods outside a small town in Indiana, a dad gave his daughter a shiny new bicycle, and she loved it.

It would be months before she could ride it, and she'd have to learn how, but that didn't matter.

All that mattered was that the old saying was right.

Some things, like enjoying Christmas morning with family even though it's been years since you've had one, really are like riding a bike.

10. A Certain Point of View

A Certain Point of View

Fandom: Stranger Things

Rated: PG

Category: Gen. Family. Hopper and Eleven with a side of Mike. Holiday fic.

Time Frame: Probably between seasons two and three, or a bit later.

Spoilers: General series knowledge.

Summary: A wise man once said that you will find that many of the truths we cling to depend greatly up our own point of view. Eleven, as she becomes more and more integrated into society, gets a lesson in that very thing.

Jane had taken a while to understand the whole Santa thing.

At first, she'd assumed he was like her. Just someone with powers who used them a bit differently.

But when she'd realized he was a myth, she's shrugged it off as yet another weird idiosyncrasy of the world she now found herself in.

So when Holly asked her what she wanted Santa to bring her, she started to answer the only way she could - honestly.

"Nothing," she replied.

Holly gaped at her. "Nothing?!"

Jane shrugged. "Well, since Santa's not.."

Suddenly, Mike clapped a hand over her mouth.

"Not going to visit her because she's been naughty!" finished Mike, giving Jane a glare.

Jane answered with a puzzled look of her own as Mike plowed on.

"What about you?" he asked Holly.

Holly grinned. "I want a Barbie. The one with the red dress. And the purple My Little Pony."

Mike smiled. He'd already gotten her the purple pony. It's been a guess, but he was glad he'd been right.

"But..." said Jane as Holly continued.

Mike shot her another glare and she shut up, but she was clearly confused.

"Later," hissed Mike.

Jane shrugged as Holly finished up her list with a Care Bear and a Chipmunks record.

Mike nodded at her. "That's a good list," he said. Then he thought for a minute and gave her a shrewd look. "But it's awfully late. Santa might not bring you all that stuff if you don't get to sleep."

Holly sucked in a breath at that and her eyes got big. Then she ran off to get ready for bed.

Mike smiled widely.

"And that," he said, "is how you get your little sister to bed on time."

As soon as Holly was out of earshot, Jane rounded on him.

"Why did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Lie."

"I didn't lie."

"You did. Santa's not real."

"Sh!" said Mike. "She might hear you!"

"So?"

"So she's still young enough to believe in Santa!"

"And?"

"And what?"

"What happened to 'friends don't lie'?"

Mike blinked at Jane.

"I didn't lie."

"But you did."

Mike sighed. "No, I didn't! Well, yeah, I did. But only a bit. Sort of."

"There's no sort of lie. Something is either true or not," said Jane.

Mike sighed again.

"Well, yes. No. I mean, sometimes it's ok to tell a little lie. Look, it's complicated, OK?"

Jane stared at him intensely and spoke plainly.

"Explain."

Mike ran a hand through his floppy hair.

"OK. So, um, you shouldn't lie. Except sometimes when it'll hurt people's feelings or upset them. If it's a little lie. It's called a white lie."

Jane looked unimpressed.

"Like, a surprise party. If someone asks you about it, you say you don't know. So you don't spoil the surprise."

Jane's look softened a bit, and Mike continued.

"Or Santa. Kids believe in Santa. It's fun. They learn pretty soon that he's not real, but when they're little, it's like magic. So you don't ruin the fun. You let them believe for a few years."

Jane's forehead wrinkled up. She was thinking hard about Mike's words.

"So..." she said. "It's ok to lie a little when it makes people happy?"

Mike shrugged. "Well, yeah. If it's a little lie. Not something big."

"What about..." Jane started, then stopped.

"What about what?" prompted Mike.

"What about if the lie is mostly true, but not all the way true?"

"I dunno," said Mike. "Would depend on the lie. If it's mostly true, it's not a big lie, so it might be OK."

Jane nodded absently, then more firmly. Then she stood up decisively and made for the door.

"Where are you going?" asked Mike.

"Almost time," answered Jane, reverting back to her old pattern of clipped, short answers.

Mike glanced at his watch and realized she was right. Still, it wasn't like her to be so rushed.

"You OK?" he asked.

Jane nodded distractedly as she pulled on her shoes.

"You sure?"

Jane nodded again. "Yes. No. I don't know."

"What's up?"

Jane looked down at the floor for a moment, then swallowed.

"Mama."

"What?" Mike was floored. He'd never heard anything about Jane's mother. Ever.

Just then, an engine rumbled in the drive and a car door slammed.

"Never mind," said Jane, giving Mike a quick, chaste kiss on the cheek and bounding out the door.

She met Hopper halfway to the house with a fierce hug. Hopper returned the hug, then pulled away and looked into her face.

"Hey, you. What was that for?"

Jane smiled cryptically as she disengaged from him.

"Santa," she said, as she walked to the passenger side of the blazer.

Hopper stared at the back of her head for a moment, then shrugged. He'd long since learned that he'd never understand what went on in Jane's head most of the time, so he didn't bother to ask what she meant. As he climbed into the truck himself, he caught sight of Mike in the doorway of the house. The kid looked how he felt: completely lost.

The two shared a look and both shrugged again.

Hopper chuckled and started the truck as Mike went inside.

The drive home was silent, as usual.

It wasn't until a week later, at the Wheeler's Christmas party, that the men were let in on the mystery. It happened by chance, when Mike and Hopper found themselves alone in the kitchen.

"So," started Hopper, grabbing a handful of chips and piling them onto a paper plate.

Mike's head jerked up and he looked a little nervous, which made Hopper smirk.

Good, he thought. Aloud, he said, "Nice party."

Mike nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I guess," he said, getting his own chips.

Hopper nodded while putting a burger together.

And that would've been the end of it if Holly hadn't suddenly run through the room screaming at the top of her lungs.

Hot on her heels was Karen, "Holly Wheeler, you come back here this instant! You behave or Santa won't come this year!"

Both Hopper and Mike laughed at the spectacle as Holly and Karen disappeared again.

Then Mike shook his head. "Good thing El didn't let that cat out of the bag," he muttered.

His daughter's nickname (that's how they explained it when someone slipped, anyway) got Hopper's attention.

"What?"

"Oh. Jane. She almost told Holly there was no Santa."

Hopper's eyebrows went up.

"Yeah. Exactly," said Mike. "I'm just glad I stopped her."

"No doubt," agreed Hopper. "Bet that was fun."

Mike snorted. "Yeah. Especially when I had to explain how sometimes it's OK to lie. "

"You did what now?" demanded Hopper leaning slightly into Mike's personal space.

Mike physically backpedaled. "I mean, like, little lies. Like for birthday parties and Santa and stuff! Or, like, if someone has on an ugly shirt how you don't tell them!"

Hopper relaxed.

"Yeah," he drawled, thinking of how tactless Jane could be at times. "That's not a concept that's on her radar."

"I think she got it eventually," said Mike.

Hopper started to nod, then suddenly his eyes narrowed and he put

his plate down. He took a long, hard look at Mike.

"What?" asked Mike nervously.

"Was this last week? The night she came over?"

Mike nodded. "Yeah. Why?"

Hopper grunted. "Cuz when I picked her up, the only word she said to me was Santa."

"Well, at least you got that," complained Mike. "All I got was 'mama'."

Hopper froze.

"What did you just say?"

"That was her last word on the subject. Just 'mama'. "

"What, exactly, did you say before that? Last week, I mean."

Mike gave Hopper an anxious look, puzzled by his sudden intensity.

"Um... I was saying it was OK to tell a little lie if the truth would hurt someone's feelings. And then she asked me what if something was mostly true but not all the way true and I said that would probably be OK too but it would depend on the situation."

"Huh," said Hopper. Then he grabbed his plate, turned on his heel, and left.

Mike watched him go, then shrugged.

Like father, like daughter, he thought.

Later, as the party wound down, Hopper found Jane playing a card game with the boys and Max.

"Ready to head out, kiddo?" he asked.

"Can I finish this hand? We're almost done."

Hopper nodded, pleased with the normal interaction and speech.

"Sure. I'll meet you outside."

Two cigarettes later, Jane let herself out of the house and she and Hopper headed home.

Halfway there, Jim broke the usual silence.

"I heard you nearly spoiled Santa for Holly a while ago."

Jane nodded. "Didn't know how it worked."

"Santa?"

"No," said Jane, shaking her head. "Lying."

Hopper took a deep breath.

"Yeah, that's..." he started.

"Complicated?" finished Jane.

Hopper nodded. "Yeah. Complicated."

"Sometimes it's OK?"

"Sometimes. For little things."

It was quiet for a minute, then Jane spoke again.

"Like with mama."

Hopper swallowed. "No. No, kid. I shouldn't have lied to you about that. That was a big thing. "

"Except..."

"Except what?"

Jane hesitated, then spoke slowly.

"Except not. It was only a little lie."

"How do you figure?"

Jane swallowed as Jim pulled into the drive. "It was mostly true. You said mama was gone. And she is... mostly."

Hopper shut off the truck.

"Yeah," he muttered. "Yeah, she is. I'm sorry."

"She won't come back."

"Doubt it."

"So you didn't lie. Not really. Well, you did, but..."

She met his eyes then, and her tears were mirrored by his own.

"I just thought..." he said, then he trailed off, not sure of the right words.

Jane smiled sadly at him.

"Like Santa," she whispered.

Hopper chuckled. Leave it to Jane to put something so complicated so simply.

"Yeah," he said. "Like Santa."

Jane opened her door and went in the house. Jim followed a moment later.

And despite the fact that she didn't believe in him, Santa sure was good to her that year.

11. Keep It Simple

Keep It Simple

Fandom: Stranger Things

Rated: G

Category: Gen. Vignette. Family, Friendship. Entire Party.

Time Frame: Shortly after Season Two.

Spoilers: Stranger Things, Season Two.

Summary: Some things in life are complicated. Others are really quite simple.

Word Count: 1184

Note: this one is for lemonpiefirefly, who distilled something for me the other day.

Eleven had been looking forward to this for ages. But now that it was actually happening, she gave Mike a dubious look.

The trip to Indianapolis had been long. Well, longer than she'd have liked, anyway, and the payoff didn't seem like it was worth it.

"Come on," said Mike. "It'll be fun. Honest."

El sighed. She wasn't very confident of that, but she gamely followed as Mike, Dustin, and Lucas jumped out of Hopper's blazer. Hopper himself joined them a second later.

Behind them, Nancy, Will, Max, Jonathan, and Joyce emerged from Jonathan's car.

Once they were all accounted for, they turned as one and started walking to their destination: the mall.

It wasn't much of a mall, really. Not by big city standards. But it was bigger than anything they had in Hawkins, and to the kids, it was more than enough to get excited about - especially at Christmas. Besides, it was the closest place that had a full Sears store, which was how they convinced Hopper to take them on what they kept calling a family outing.

As they walked, their reactions were varied.

Lucas, Mike, Will, and Dustin chatted excitedly about what they wanted to look at.

Jonathan looked bored.

Nancy was a bit giddy at the thought of clothes shopping.

Hopper and Max looked like they'd rather be anywhere else.

Joyce smiled at the boys fondly.

And Eleven looked nervous.

Nancy snuck up behind her as she lagged a little behind the others.

"Just stay close to me."

El looked at her like she was crazy.

"Do you really trust them," she said, pointing at the boys, "to help you pick out clothes?"

El made a disgusted face.

"Exactly."

Eleven seemed a little more relaxed, but she was still anxious. It seemed like Hopper was wearing off on her.

"What if we see people we know?"

"We won't," assured Nancy.

And they didn't. They managed to spend four hours at the mall, complete with several new outfits for El, lunch for everyone, video game time for the boys (and Max, who beat everyone soundly except on Galaga), some clandestine holiday shopping, and a power saw for Hopper, with minimal drama.

That is, until they left the mall and were walking back to their cars.

As they crossed the parking lot, a shout rang out.

"Jim Hopper, is that you?"

Hopper turned to find Loretta Price, Hawkins very own town gossip, walking toward the group.

He tried to hurry the party along and away from Loretta, but it was too late. She caught up with them and opened her arms wide to indicate the whole group.

"And who's this? Joyce Byers and her boys! Plus the Wheelers. And young Misters Sinclair and Henderson! How lovely to see you all!"

She turned to Max then. "And you must be Miss Mayfield. That red hair gives you away, you know."

Max rolled her eyes. Yes, she did know. And she hated how people always said things like that. Honestly, people acted like they'd never seen a redhead before. And what was with the last names with this lady, anyway?

No one managed to get a word in before Loretta continued.

"But who are you, my dear?" she asked, peering at Eleven.

Hopper and El both opened their mouths to launch into their cover story, but they made it no farther than that, because suddenly Max was talking.

"Oh, never mind her. She's just my cousin. But did you hear that Old Man Murphy's got a girlfriend?"

She wagged her eyes at Loretta and grinned conspiratorially. Loretta instantly forgot about El.

"Really?"

Max nodded. "Rumor is she's staying over, even."

Loretta put a hand to her chest. "No!"

Max nodded again. "Nobody knows who it is, either. Just that she's from out of town."

Loretta's eyes gleamed, and Max kept going.

"Mrs. Johnson said it might be a relative, but I don't believe it for a minute."

While Max kept Loretta enthralled, Hopper slowly eased away from the pair and motioned for everyone else to follow him.

A moment later, everyone was packed back up into the cars, and he leaned out the window of the blazer and shouted out to Max.

"Hey! Kid! You better move it or we'll leave you here!"

Max apologized to Loretta, then hopped into the truck. Dustin had swapped to Jonathan's car to make room for her with Hopper.

As soon as the door closed behind her, Max let out a big breath.

"Thank you," she said, catching Hopper's eye in the mirror after she settled into the back seat.

"Back at ya," grumbled Hopper. "Nice job."

Max grinned, then shrugged.

"Somebody had to do it. And besides, I know her type. Got an aunt like that."

"Not your first rodeo, huh?" asked Hopper.

Max scoffed. "Hardly."

Hopper nodded appreciatively.

"Well, you did a good job. Poor Murph, though."

Max shared a grin with Lucas and Mike, but she carefully hid that from Hopper. To him, she only shrugged.

She didn't catch Hopper's slight smirk.

But the way she saw it was that if Old Man Murphy didn't want her to throw him under the gossip bus, he shouldn't have yelled at the group when they cut across his pasture on their bikes.

The rest of the drive home was filled with the general chatter that only adolescents can make and exasperated sighs from Hopper.

When they got back to Hawkins, he dropped each kid off before heading home with Eleven.

As they walked through the woods to the cabin after parking the truck, El suddenly broke their usual quiet with a question.

"Why did Max do that?"

"Do what?" asked Hopper, distracted by carrying his packages and watching his step.

"Help me."

"Help you?"

"With the lady."

Hopper chuckled. "Loretta? Well, because Max is your friend."

"Friend?"

"Yeah, kid. She's a friend. What's up with you? You know what friends are."

They reached the cabin, and Hopper shouldered open the door.

As they went inside, El spoke again.

"But..."

"But what?" asked Hopper. "Max saved our butts. Better than our story of you being my niece would have, by the way. Loretta won't even remember you now. And Max did that because she's your friend and friends help each other out."

Hopper leveled a stare at Eleven. He didn't know exactly why El had

issues with Max, but he had a pretty good guess. And he wasn't having it.

"It's really pretty simple, kiddo."

Eleven blinked at him, then smiled shyly.

"It really is, isn't it?"

Hopper nodded. "Yep," he said, popping the "p" a bit. "Now, you want popcorn?"

He brandished a Jiffy Pop container at her and she nodded enthusiastically.

Ten minutes later, they were seated on the couch in time for their favorite show, munching happily.

And the next time Eleven saw Max, things were different. They'd already come a long way since their beginning, courtesy of Dustin explaining a few things, but from then on, they were friends.

Because Max had helped. Many times.

And it really was that simple.

12. Model Student

Model Student

Fandom: Stranger Things

Rated: G

Category: Double Drabble. Gen. Family. Dad Hopper.

Time Frame: Shortly after Season Two.

Spoilers: Stranger Things, Season Two.

Summary: Hopper had never been much for studying when he was younger. But things change.

Note: written for the random word prompt of *module*.

Hopper hadn't opened a textbook since high school, and even then it had been pretty rare.

He hadn't really needed to. Between a natural aptitude for most things and teachers not caring about the rest (no one cared if you could do advanced math if you could tackle well), he had skated his way through school.

The military had been similar. He hadn't had to study in basic training. He was never going to get a desk job. He had above average marksmanship and could take a punch, so no one cared if he was book smart. The only test results his CO cared about were related to physical fitness and targeting scores.

So late night cram sessions were a foreign concept to him.

But here he was, poring over a study guide at midnight. He was tired, and work came early in the morning, but still he read and reviewed and took notes.

Because Jane had a lot of catching up to do, and he'd assigned her three modules to do the next day.

And she always had questions about her work.

Always.

And so he studied. Most every night.

And he wouldn't have had it any other way.

13. Stand Your Ground

Stand Your Ground

Fandom: Stranger Things

Rated: G

Category: Gen. Double Drabble. Family, Friendship. Max Focus.

Time Frame: Season Two, in between the gate and the dance.

Spoilers: Stranger Things, Season Two.

Summary: Max stands her ground. It pays off, in more ways than one.

Note: this one is for Alasdair, because he agreed that Max would never wear a dress, and for services rendered through the years.

"I'm not wearing that," said Max, her voice making it clear she wouldn't budge on the matter.

Her mother sighed. "But it's so nice."

"I don't care. I'm not wearing a dress."

"Why not?"

Max blinked. "Because I don't like them."

"But it'd look so good on you," whined her mom.

"I don't care."

"Maxine Mayfield, you will wear this dress to the dance!"

"No, I won't."

"I won't have you going out looking like something the cat dragged in!"

"I'll wear nice pants. It'll be fine."

"It's a dance, Maxine."

"Max. And I'm aware of that."

"Which is why you have to wear a dress."

"I don't have to do anything."

"It's expected."

"Oh, please. Who cares?"

"I do! We're new here! I want you to fit in!"

Max scoffed, thinking of her friends. "Too late for that."

"What?"

"Nothing."

Mother stared down daughter for a moment. Eventually, the mom blinked.

"Fine. Whatever. Wear what you want," she said, waving dismissively.

Max grinned as her mom left. She was finally starting to win these battles, and it felt nice.

It felt even better to wear jeans to the dance.

Especially when the dress looked far better on Eleven.

14. Lessons Learned

Lessons Learned

Fandom: Stranger Things

Rated: PG

Category: Gen. Vignette. Humor. Joyce and Hopper Friendship.

Time Frame: Season Two. After the gate, before the dance.

Spoilers: Stranger Things, Season Two.

Summary: Hopper generally tried to forget New York. But not this time.

Word Count: 479

Joyce rang through the purchase without looking up.

She did that a lot. It was an occupational hazard to being a cashier. Eye contact and pleasantries were the first to go after a long night with a sick kid or one customer too many.

And today, she'd had both already, and she was just going through the motions.

That is, until chuckle and a rumbling voice responded to her statement of the amount.

"Well, good morning to you too."

Joyce looked up to meet Hopper's eyes. He had that grin on his face that always made her unsure of whether to smile back or smack it off his face.

She went with neither this time.

Instead, she looked down at the purchase, then back up at him.

"Makeup?" she asked, clearly puzzled.

Hopper glanced around the store and seeing it nearly empty, he shrugged. "Jane."

"Ah," said Joyce. "For the dance?"

Hopper nodded, his smile growing a bit sappy.

Joyce pretended not to notice.

"You need me to come help with it?"

Hopper waved her off. "I got it."

Joyce leveled a skeptical look at him.

"What?" he asked defensively.

"You know you can't let her do it, right, Hop?"

Hopper nodded as he handed her some bills. "Duh. Of course. She'll put on way too much color and not enough base. Everyone does that at first."

Joyce gaped at him as she absently took his money.

"And you would know this how?" she asked as she returned his change.

Hopper shrugged – then he actually winked.

Joyce tried to respond, but found she had no words.

Hopper chuckled, then collected his things. Joyce was still speechless as he turned and left.

It wasn't until he paused briefly at the store entryway to look over his shoulder with raised brows and a gleam in his eye that she recovered her voice.

"Clearly you never met Dennis," he shot back, wagging his eyebrows as he did.

He didn't wait for a response before slipping out the door, but Joyce's shout of "Hopper!" followed him as he giggled like a child all the way to the car.

He'd explain later. How it was a lifetime ago. How he'd been young and poor and just fun-loving enough to try most anything once.

But for now, he'd let Joyce stew on all the possible inferences she could imagine, and he'd enjoy every minute of her suffering.

He wouldn't keep her in suspense too long, though. She didn't deserve that. After all, she had offered to help. And he appreciated the offer, really.

But he wasn't worried. Jane would look just fine for the Snow Ball.

Because if two years of living with a drag queen in a low-rent district in New York City had taught Hopper anything, it was how to do hair and makeup.

Especially since Dennis occasionally needed extras for his show.

15. Monday Morning Magic

Monday Morning Magic

Fandom: Stranger Things

Rated: PG

Category: Gen. Vignette. Hopper Focus.

Time Frame: Season One. After the Demogorgon, before the forest.

Spoilers: Stranger Things, Season One.

Summary: There were some things Hopper just didn't question.

Word Count: 557

Flo's voice drifted through the door as her fist banged on it.

"Hop!" she called. "Line two!"

Hopper sighed and picked up the phone.

"Hopper."

The voice on the other end of the line belonged to Mister Craig, the ancient janitor at the middle school, and it took Hopper a minute to understand what he was talking about.

"It's all gone," he said.

"What's gone?"

"The salt."

"The salt?"

"It was here on Friday."

"Friday?"

Hopper heard a sigh before Craig answered.

"Yes. The salt. For the sidewalks and the parking lots. It's gone. All but a half dozen bags."

Now it was Hopper's turn to sigh. He rubbed his forehead absently as Craig kept going.

"I came in this morning and it was just gone."

"And it was there Friday?" said Hopper, trying his best to sound official and professional. "You sure?"

"Absolutely. I was in here just before I left. It was all here."

"Huh," grunted Hopper.

"And it's fine for now," said Craig, "but you know we'll need it soon and..."

"Yeah, yeah, ok," said Hopper. "Probably just some kid pulling a prank. But I'll look into it."

"See that you do," mumbled Craig. Then he hung up, and Hopper was left with a throbbing headache.

Christ, he thought, was that only two days ago?

He just sat there for a minute, utterly exhausted, realizing that yes, it was only over the weekend that he'd entered an episode of *The Twilight Zone*.

Then he took a deep breath and dialed a number he wasn't supposed to know.

When a gruff voice picked up and demanded to know who he was, he cut right to the chase.

"You dumbasses forgot something."

"Excuse me?" said the voice.

"The salt," answered Hopper, in a similar exchange to the one he'd had with Craig.

"Salt?"

"Yeah. Salt."

A beat passed and a new voice came on the line.

"Chief Hopper?"

Hopper grinned. "You guessed it."

"What's this about salt?"

"You forgot about it."

"What are you taking about?"

Hopper chuckled darkly. "Of course, I guess that's understandable. I mean, with the bodies and the damages and all. Really quite impressive how well you cleaned up. Something was bound to get forgotten."

"Sh! This is an unsecured line!"

"Oh, is it?" asked Hopper, all innocence.

He heard a resigned sigh, but said nothing. He just waited.

He didn't have to wait long. After a moment, the voice continued.

"What is it that you need, Chief?"

"Fifty bags of road salt. In the middle school storage shed. Tomorrow."

"I can't get that there that quickly."

Hopper raised an eyebrow, but again said nothing. His response did the trick, despite his intended target not seeing his gesture.

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow."

There was another sigh.

"Fine. I'll figure it out."

"Knew you'd see it my way," said Hopper with a grin.

Then he hung up.

And lo and behold, Craig called back the next day to report that the salt had reappeared and Hopper cancelled his "investigation."

Hopper never asked how the goons at the lab had managed to get it there that fast, but he frankly didn't care.

If anyone asked, he'd wave his hands with a flourish and announce that it must have been magic, which as far as he was concerned, after the weekend he'd had, was the absolute truth.

16. Words Matter

Words Matter

Fandom: Stranger Things

Rated: G

Category: Gen. Vignette. Hopper and Eleven.

Time Frame: Any time after Season One.

Spoilers: Stranger Things, Season Two.

Summary: Say what you mean, mean what you say.

Word Count: 340

Note: written for the random word prompt of "temperature."

Hopper took the thermometer out of El's mouth and sighed.

"Yep," he said. "That settles it. You're sick. You have a temperature."

Eleven looked puzzled.

"What?" asked Hopper, now confused as well.

"Don't I always have a temperature?"

Hopper chuckled. "I guess so, but..."

El cut him off. "Doesn't everything?"

Hopper nodded. "Well, yeah. But yours is higher than it's supposed to be. You have a fever."

"Oh!" said Eleven. She knew what fevers were. She and Hopper had had a long, painful discussion about them when she got her first and was convinced she would die, like in the book. He'd finally gotten her over the fear and through the sickness, but he cursed *Anne of Green Gables* to this day.

"Oh is right," said Hopper. "Hold on. I'll get some medicine."

"OK," sniffled El, stifling a cough as Hopper retreated to the bathroom.

Hopper returned a moment later and handed Eleven two pills and a cup of water.

She dutifully took her medicine and then looked up at Hopper from her pillows.

"So, why didn't you say 'fever' to begin with?"

Hopper sighed. "It's just a phrase, kid."

"It's stupid."

"Maybe," agreed Hopper. "But it's something people say."

"But you said I should always try to use the right words."

"And you should," said Hopper. "But sometimes... look, I don't know... it's just something people say."

Eleven looked unimpressed. "Words matter," she grumbled.

"Yeah, they do," said Hopper, "so how about we learn some more?"

He opened a book to read to her (and to change the subject), and she nodded.

He only got through the first few pages before she was fast asleep.

He shut the book and went to bed himself.

El recovered quickly from her illness. Two days later, she was back to her normal self.

Hopper, however, woke that day feeling like death warmed over. And he decided right then and there that El was right. Words do matter.

Because did not just have a temperature that day.

He most definitely had a fever.

17. Triggered

Triggered

Fandom: Stranger Things

Rated: G

Category: Gen. Vignette. Friendship. Entire Party.

Time Frame: Shortly after Season Two.

Spoilers: Stranger Things, Season Two.

Summary: The strangest things sometimes set Jane off. But the party doesn't mind. Much.

Word Count: 280

It finally happened.

Hopper let Jane go to the arcade.

He gave her spending money, too.

And since she didn't do such things often and Hopper had more than a bit of guilt about that, Jane had more than the other kids combined.

The group was in adolescent heaven. Jane didn't mind sharing, so they played games for a while, and when they got hungry, they stopped for a snack. They ordered a plate of nachos to share with big grins on their faces. That is, until the teen behind the counter asked them if they wanted drinks.

"Yeah," answered Dustin for everyone. "Six Cokes, please."

The young man set the cans on the counter and turned to his register to ring them through. He didn't notice how Jane focused on the drinks and started to tremble just a little.

When she whispered "same can," Max and Mike were the only ones who heard her. Both reacted immediately.

"Never mind," yelled Mike, too loudly.

Max talked over him. "We'll just have water."

Dustin, Will, and Lucas looked at them like they were nuts, but a mouthed "trust me" from Mike had them both shrugging and the cashier rolling his eyes and taking the drinks back.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. No one asked why Jane had freaked out over six Coke cans. They just accepted it as part of her, just like they accepted drinking water that day, and Pepsi or Shasta on so many other days.

But when New Coke came out the next spring, with its just different enough cans, they were the rare exception to the rule, because they couldn't get enough of that stuff.

A/N: Ah, New Coke. Just look it up. ;)

18. Repurposed

Repurposed

Fandom: Stranger Things

Rated: G

Category: Gen. Vignette. Friendship. Eleven and Will.

Time Frame: Shortly after Season Two.

Spoilers: Stranger Things, Season Two.

Summary: Some things are just meant for a higher purpose.

Word Count: 534

Will rummaged through the closet for a few minutes before he found what he was looking for.

"Ah-ha!" he exclaimed, slowly extricating himself from boxes and bins. "Got 'em!"

Then he shoved his find in his backpack and ran out the front door.

Joyce called after him.

"Where are you going?"

"Hopper's!" yelled Will over his shoulder.

Joyce sighed and waved him off easily, because although Jim wasn't exactly the biggest fan of the situation, his cabin was one of the few places she'd let Will go on his own.

She still picked up the phone and dialed a familiar number, though, just to let Hopper know to expect Will. She might be ok with him biking there now, but she still kept tabs on him.

After two rings, Eleven answered.

"Hello?"

Joyce smiled. "Hey, El. It's Joyce. Is Hopper there?"

"No."

At that, Joyce blinked.

"Where is he?" she asked.

"Outside," said Eleven simply.

Joyce exhaled. For a moment, she'd forgotten that El was so very literal.

"But he's there at the cabin?"

Eleven looked out the window and saw Hopper by his truck.

"Yes. Do you need to talk to him?"

Joyce shook her head.

"No, sweetie. That's OK. Just... When he comes inside, can you tell him Will is on his way over? That he just left?"

"OK," said Eleven.

Then she hung up the phone, still pretty shaky on things like etiquette.

Joyce chuckled as she hung up too and continued getting ready for work.

Two miles away, as the crow flies or the bike goes through the woods, Will slid to a stop in front of Hopper's cabin.

Hopper wasn't home. He'd left for work shortly after El had seen him without coming back inside, so Eleven hadn't passed on Joyce's message, but she also hadn't lied. Not exactly.

And in this case, what his mother didn't know couldn't hurt him, so Will grinned as El opened the door.

"You bring them?" she asked.

Will nodded enthusiastically.

Eleven smiled widely and let him in. Then they got to work.

Two hours later, they were done. They admired their handiwork for a while, then Will headed back to his house.

He was home before anyone was the wiser about his and El's afternoon adventure.

That is, until Hopper got home from work that night and discovered his nondescript cabin had become a winter wonderland inside.

Paper snowflakes adorned the walls and windows, and strings of holiday lights hung from the rafters.

Hopper didn't even ask where El had gotten her supplies. He just sighed, shook his head, then started to laugh.

He laughed for a good minute before El spoke.

"It's OK?"

Hopper pulled her into a hug.

"Yeah, kid. It's OK."

And he meant it. While he wasn't too keen on making the place more noticeable, everything El had done was inside. It wasn't any more obvious than a light in the window.

So he was fine with it.

And when Joyce came over later in the week, she had to agree.

Her Christmas lights looked far better in the rafters of the Hopper home than they did nailed over a sloppy alphabet on her living room wall.

19. More Than Meets the Eye

More Than Meets the Eye

Fandom: Stranger Things

Rated: G

Category: Gen. Drabble. Family. Hopper.

Time Frame: Season Two: after the gate, before the dance.

Spoilers: Stranger Things, Season Two.

Summary: You really shouldn't judge a book by its cover. Or a policeman by his uniform.

Jim Hopper was the stereotypical man's man.

He was big and strong and into sports and knew his way around weapons.

So he didn't cry.

At least, that was the rumor.

That Jim Hopper, Chief of Police and All-American guy, was way too tough for that.

Funny thing about rumors, though. They're only sometimes true.

So while most citizens of Hawkins would have been shocked to find their police chief sobbing like a baby in his truck that day, Hopper himself wasn't a bit surprised.

And if El ever noticed the smudges on her birth certificate, she didn't mention them.

20. Defense Mechanism

Defense Mechanism

Fandom: Stranger Things

Rated: G

Category: Vignette. Family. Hopper, Eleven, and Will. Mild Jopper angst.

Time Frame: Any time after season two.

Spoilers: Stranger Things, season two.

Summary: Playing possum isn't just for possums, you know.

Word Count: 853.

Hopper was asleep on the couch.

And Joyce wasn't home. Jonathan had taken her to visit her mother for the weekend.

So the kids used the opportunity to sneak into the living room and change the channel on the TV.

As they fiddled with the antenna and the knobs, trying to get a clear picture, Hopper rolled over to face the back of the couch and grunted.

They froze, but when he settled again, they continued trying to watch *Doctor Who*, like they always tried to do at eleven on Saturday nights. It was a special treat when they managed it, because while they were allowed to watch it, they rarely got the opportunity.

Between schedules, only having one TV, random air times (but always late at night), and sketchy reception at best, it just wasn't something they could do regularly.

Tonight, it seemed, wasn't their night.

Try as they might, they couldn't get more than some scratchy, accented voices to come from the TV. Nothing appeared on the screen except static.

After several minutes of trying, Will sighed.

"Not gonna happen," he mumbled.

El shrugged. "We can still listen," she said. "You can still tell what's going on."

Will nodded. "That's true. I just don't understand why I won't come in. It's PBS!"

Eleven blinked at him, and he realized she had no idea what he meant. "Oh, never mind," he said, annoyed, but letting it go. He settled in next to El and they listened to the TV for the next half hour, doing pretty well with understanding the impromptu radio drama.

Eventually, though, they lost interest in having to work so hard at entertainment, and they started to chat.

They covered everything from school to movies to books and comics.

And during it all, Hopper never budged. He'd snore occasionally and send the kids into giggles, but that was it. He slept on.

That is, until a particularly loud laugh from Will woke him enough to make him realize he had to pee. He was comfortable, though, so he still didn't move.

That ended up being a very good thing, because the next thing he heard brought him fully awake in an instant.

"You think they'll ever do it?" asked El. Her voice held a note of suggestion that Hopper wasn't entirely comfortable with. There was no denying what "it" was in her question.

Hopper mentally perked up, but still didn't move. He needed to know the "who" in the question before he acted, so he played possum.

Will giggled.

"I don't know. I wish they would, though."

"Right?" said El, clearly exasperated.

"I mean, they spend a ton of time together. And it's so obvious," said Will, dragging out the 'o' in so for so long that Hopper couldn't help but roll his eyes. Clearly, the kids thought these people were idiots.

"Ugh, I know," agreed Eleven. "It's like a soap opera."

Will laughed. "Totally. Complete with kids caught in the middle."

Now Hopper was confused. He couldn't figure out how kids would be involved in whatever this was. His curiosity was about to get the better of him and he was about to roll over and ask for the details when Eleven's smallest voice, the one she used when she was unsure, stayed his movement.

"Will?"

"Yeah?"

"Would it be OK?"

"Would what be OK?"

"If, you know, they did."

"Of course!"

"Like, if they... if me and you..." Eleven trailed off, but Will picked up her thread.

"If they got married? If we were brother and sister?"

El nodded, and Hopper's eyes widened as he realized which two idiots the kids had been talking about.

"It would be awesome, Jane," said Will, using her given name instead of her nickname very much on purpose. "At least I think so."

"Me too," said El, beaming broadly.

"Good. Now let's go to bed. It's cold out here," said Will, running his hands up and down his arms.

"OK," said Eleven with a shrug.

And just like that, the conversation was over. Will and El wandered off to Will's room, where she had a cot set up on the floor. Neither one of them slept for a while, since they continued to talk in muffled voices punctuated by giggling, but they certainly slept a whole lot more than Hopper, who just stared at the back of the couch until he no longer heard them.

Then he got up to pee and went to bed in Jonathan's room.

Eventually, he'd fall back asleep. He wouldn't dream.

And in the morning, awakened by footsteps and shouts in the hallway, he'd get up and do what he always did. He'd pretend he was none the wiser.

But when Joyce returned that afternoon, and they all had a light dinner before Hopper took El home, he'd catch himself looking at Joyce and wondering if maybe... just maybe...

Then he'd see Will or Eleven looking at him looking at Joyce and he'd go back to eating.

It was safer that way.

Whatever they'd awoken in him could stay asleep. Or at least pretend to be.

21. Twofer

Twofer

Fandom: Stranger Things

Rated: G

Category: Ficlet. Friendship, family. Max and Eleven. Implied mild Jopper.

Time Frame: Any time after season two.

Spoilers: Stranger Things, Season Two.

Summary: In which Eleven gets a much better deal than Max.

Word Count: 272

"So, let me get this straight," said Jane, pinning Max down with her eyes as they shared a basket of fries at the arcade while the boys played games. "Billy's dad married your mom after your mom and your real dad broke up."

Max nodded. "Divorced."

"Right, divorced," repeated Jane. "So now Billy's dad is your stepdad and Billy is your step brother."

"Correct," said Max, trying to be patient with Jane's efforts to understand family dynamics and expand her vocabulary now that she spoke mostly like a normal kid.

"So if Hopper ever gets married..." mused Jane. She didn't complete her thought, so Max tried to.

"You'd get a stepmom."

Jane nodded. "OK. What about...stepbrothers? Or sisters?"

Max shrugged. "Would depend on if she had any other kids before."

"That seems... complicated."

"Believe me, it is," mumbled Max.

"And what if..."

"What?"

"What if mine was like yours?"

Max blinked and just stared at Jane for a minute before she got it.
"You mean, like Billy?"

Jane nodded, with an odd mixture of fear and anger in her eyes.

Max laughed out loud.

"What?" asked Jane defensively. "He's not very nice. And what if?"

Max cut her off with a wave of one hand.

"You don't have to worry about that."

"Why not?"

Max glanced over at the Galaga machine, where the rest of their usual party plus their older siblings were gathered, then looked back at Jane.

"Cuz if you ever get a stepbrother," she said clearly, "you'll get two. And they're both pretty awesome."

Just then, Jonathan whooped after Will cleared a level, and Jane decided Max was right.

22. True Sight

True Sight

Fandom: Stranger Things

Rated: PG

Category: Drabble. Implied Jopper.

Time Frame: Any time after season two.

Spoilers: Stranger Things, season two.

Summary: Flo has always seen things clearly.

Note: Thanks, Flo. You allowed me to finish on time. Posting this one out of order, but here we are, folks. Twenty-four fics by Christmas Eve. First time for everything!

Flo had known Hopper a long time.

She remembered when he was just a kid, before war and death and divorce changed him.

And she'd always had a gift.

She had the uncanny ability to know what people needed, rather than what they wanted.

In another time, she would've made a hell of a detective.

Because it wasn't rocket science. It was just observation. It was noticing things.

So, this year, she didn't give Hopper a present for Christmas.

Instead, she merely taped a memo to his desk, right where he'd see it.

It contained only two words.

Call Joyce.

23. Safe Space

Safe Space

Fandom: Stranger Things

Rated: PG

Category: Vignette. Family. Hopper and Eleven.

Time Frame: Any time after season two.

Spoilers: Stranger Things, season two.

Summary: It's rare that we can drop all pretenses. But sometimes, in the right crowd, we can.

Word Count: 565

Christmas was a hard time of the year for Jim Hopper.

He'd spent the last several at the bottom of a bottle of either liquor or pills or both, and he'd never planned on changing that.

But here he was, completely sober and fiddling with an ancient radio to listen to carols with Jane as she strung actual popcorn to put on the little tree he'd dragged into the cabin.

She didn't know any of the songs when the night started, but since holiday music tends to be rather limited in scope, she was humming along soon enough, and eventually, when she'd moved on to the tinsel he'd picked up in town, she was singing some of the words as Hopper watched, leaned back on the couch sipping soda - and smiling in spite of himself.

But then it happened. A song came on that stopped her in her tracks, and she tilted her head to listen to it more carefully. Because of her reaction, Hopper did the same.

Then he chuckled, which got Jane's attention. She met his eyes and started to laugh too.

Then she laughed harder, and before they knew it, both Hopper and Jane were holding their bellies and laughing so hard tears came from their eyes.

When they finally settled down, the song was over and Jane had questions.

"Was that a real song?" asked Jane.

Hopper nodded. "Afraid so."

"It's funny."

"It is," agreed Hopper, though he had been laughing mostly at Jane, not at the song itself. It was extraordinarily rare to see her laugh, so when she did, it was contagious – especially to him.

"I didn't hear all the words," said Jane, looking a bit sad.

Hopper shrugged. "Well, you'll just have to wait until they play it again."

Jane pouted - just a little - then went back to her tinsel as "Silent Night" played quietly in the background. Hopper blinked. Talk about a juxtaposition. He looked at the radio as if it could explain its sudden change in personality.

When he did, he saw his old turntable next to it, and he grinned.

"Unless..." he murmured.

"Unless what?" asked Jane.

Hopper jumped up and started rummaging through his albums. Jane joined him, leaning over his shoulder as he muttered to himself.

"Has to be here somewhere. I think I had it. But I'm not sure."

Jane ignored him until he suddenly grabbed a disc that was smaller than most of the others and held it above his head triumphantly.

"Ah-ha!" he said, quickly putting his find on the record player and shutting off the radio.

"What is it?" asked Jane.

Hopper grinned wide. "You'll see."

A moment later, the twangy sounds of "Grandma Got Run Over By A Reindeer" filled the cabin, and Jane was laughing hard again as she danced around the room.

Hopper watched her until her second pass by him, when she grabbed his hand and pulled him into her antics.

They might have forgotten all about the tree for a while that night. They might have listened to the same single over and over to the point that Jane knew all the words. And they might have danced like no one was watching, because it was just them.

And when it was just them, the fact that they both had a twisted, dark, and very silly sense of humor was just fine.

24. Refrain

Refrain

Fandom: Stranger Things

Rated: PG

Category: Ficlet. Jopper.

Time Frame: Holiday season following season two.

Spoilers: Stranger Things, season two.

Summary: Some things are worth repeating.

Word Count: 436

Neither one of them had wanted to go.

But since the kids couldn't shut up about it, they both went.

And that's how they found themselves outside on the Wheeler's porch at nine at night, sharing a smoke and wishing it was socially acceptable to leave a friend's party after only an hour.

"So, how're things?" asked Hopper, handing over the cigarette.

Joyce took a drag and shrugged. "Status quo. You?"

He returned the shrug. "Same."

"Jane?"

"Fine. Will? Jonathan?"

"The usual. They were excited you let Jane come."

"Yeah," said Hopper, running a hand through his hair and then taking the cigarette back. "Figured no one would notice one more body in the basement."

Joyce laughed at the joke, both because it was funny and because it was true.

Hopper chuckled with her as the strains of "Winter Wonderland"

faded away in the house to be replaced by "Blue Christmas."

This made Hopper's chuckle turn into a full laugh for a moment.

"What?" asked Joyce.

"Nothing," mumbled Hopper, stifling another chuckle and handing her the smoke.

Joyce quirked a brow at him as she accepted it. "No, really. What?"

Hopper smiled fondly at her. "It's just... you."

"Me?" Joyce gaped at him.

"Yeah, you," said Hopper, nudging her with his hip and taking the cigarette back for a last drag before stubbing it out.

Joyce blushed, just a little, but the cold covered it. "What about me?"

Hopper grinned and motioned toward the house with his head. "The song."

Joyce listened for a moment, then grinned back. "Elvis," she said.

"Elvis," confirmed Hopper, giving her a wink. "Remember how you were completely obsessed with him?"

Joyce groaned. "I had that rhinestone jacket."

"You did."

"God, I was ridiculous."

"You and every other girl in school."

"True," conceded Joyce. "But I might have taken it a bit overboard."

Hopper held up one hand, indicating a pinch. "A bit."

Joyce laughed.

"Still," mused Hopper. "You pulled it off. And do you remember

when..."

Joyce cut him off.

"I remember."

"That was a hell of a dance," said Hopper, smirking.

"It was."

Their eyes met. And suddenly, the years fell away. They were seventeen again.

"Love Me Tender" had played. They'd been without partners. They'd danced. As friends. But afterward, he'd kissed her. Just the once. It had been a simple thing - a short, almost chaste meeting of the lips. It had been the first time, and it was never repeated.

Not until twenty-five years later, on a porch in the dark while a different Elvis song played.

And this time, there was nothing chaste about it.

25. Word of the Day

Word of the Day

Fandom: Stranger Things

Rated: G

Category: Gen. Double drabble. Family. Hopper and Eleven.

Time Frame: Shortly after season two.

Spoilers: Stranger Things, season two.

Summary: Words are hard.

Note: What the heck. Here. Have a late bonus, because it was on my desktop. I've addressed this idea before, in another fandom, but this is a true story of myself as a kid.

The radio played a tinny version of "Up on the Housetop" as Hopper watched Eleven string lights around the Christmas tree. She was doing an admirable job, despite her lack of experience.

And Hopper was doing a fine job of holding down the couch and giving occasional pointers.

Suddenly, El stopped and tilted her head to one side, like a dog listening hard.

"What?" asked Hopper, instantly alert and glancing out the window.

"Nothing," said El, shaking her head. "It's just... this song doesn't make sense."

"In what way?"

"Reindeer don't have paws."

Hopper was still for a beat, then laughed out loud. That made Eleven's quizzical look turn annoyed. She hated it when she didn't understand something and that made her the butt of a joke she didn't get.

But Hopper soon stopped and patted the cushion next to him.

"Come here, kid."

El cautiously approached and sat down.

"Here," said Hopper, pulling the battered dictionary off the coffee table. "Look up pause. P-A-U-S-E, not P-A-W-S."

El did as she was told, then tossed the book back onto the table.

"That's stupid," she grumbled, crossing her arms and flopping back onto the couch.

And for once, Hopper couldn't argue.